

In Search of the Ontological Argument

Richard Oxenberg

Abstract

We can attend to the logic of Anselm's ontological argument, and amuse ourselves for a few hours unraveling its convoluted word-play, or we can seek to look beyond the flawed logic, to the search for God it expresses. From the perspective of this second approach the Ontological Argument might be seen as more than a mere argument – indeed, as something of a contemplative exercise. One can see in the argument a tantalizing attempt to capture in logical form the devotee's experience of the presence of God in the very contemplation of God. It is a peculiarity of the argument that it can seem hopelessly silly or richly evocative depending upon which of these approaches one takes. In this paper I examine the flawed logic of the Ontological Argument, but then reflect upon the contemplative experience that may underlie it.

I. Introduction

Let us begin by simply admitting that Anselm's argument, as it is proposed and as it is given, fails. It is actually unnecessary to review the argument in order to conclude this, for the argument proposes to do an impossible thing: to deduce that something exists from premises that do not assume that anything exists. To understand why this is impossible we need merely reflect on the nature of deductive reasoning. Deductive reasoning is always reasoning about the meaning of terms and what other terms are implied by them. From the point of view of a deductive argument the actual world need not and may not exist. This is why any truly deductive argument can be reduced to symbols which have no existential referents. From the symbols alone the validity of the argument can be judged, for a deductive argument merely points out the relationship between its symbols.

We can use deductive arguments to draw out necessary relationships between existing things only because, and only to the extent that, we assert that the terms of the argument stand for these existing things, and that the relationships between these terms correspond to the relationships between these existing things. Whether or not we are correct in these assertions can never be proven deductively, but only empirically.

It follows from these considerations that unless a claim is made that the terms within the premise of a deductive argument stand for something existent, no claim can be made – on the *basis* of the argument – that the terms within the conclusion stand for something existent. Or, to put it another way, the conclusion of a deductive argument can never claim the existence of something whose existence is not already implied in the existence of something claimed in the premises. Anselm would like to deduce the existence of something without positing the existence of *anything*. We do not even need to listen to the argument. We know already, from the nature of deduction, that the argument cannot be sound.

It might be objected, though, that Anselm does in fact assert the existence of something in his premise; namely, the existence of the idea of God. This, of course, is true, but the question is whether Anselm derives the existence of God from the *existence* of the idea or from the *meaning* of the idea. A careful reading of the argument shows the latter to be the case. If so, then all that is said above stands as a valid objection.

I would like to argue in the following, however, that despite the argument's overt failings it can nevertheless have profound power. It can have this, not as the *a priori* argument Anselm

intends, but as a special form of the argument from contingent being – one in which the ‘contingent being’ in question is one’s own, seeking, self.

The following paper is divided into three parts. Part one presents what may be called an ‘interpretive revision’ of the ontological argument, with the aim of bringing out its significance as an argument from contingency. Part two examines the relationship between this revised version and the original argument Anselm actually presents. Part three discusses the way in which the revised argument may serve as a spur to the contemplative awareness of God.

I. The Ontological Argument: An Interpretive Revision

Most discussions of the ontological argument assume that it concerns itself with what we might call the ‘attributes of perfection.’ The argument, we are told, purports that it is better to exist than not to exist and therefore an all-perfect being, one which possesses all the attributes of perfection, must possess existence as well.

To this argument is countered the classic response of Gaunilo. If existence is to be counted among the attributes of perfection, Gaunilo argues, then anything said to be perfect in any way must also be said to exist. Thus a perfect island, insofar as it is said to be perfect, and insofar as existence is an attribute of perfection, must also exist.

In my view, we only begin to penetrate into the deeper meaning of Anselm’s argument when we take his response to Gaunilo seriously. Gaunilo, Anselm claims, has misunderstood his argument. The idea of an all perfect *being*, Anselm says, refers to something fundamentally different than that of an all perfect island or an all perfect state or anything else to which we might attribute perfection. The argument does not claim that existence is an attribute of

perfection, such that anything said to be perfect must also be said to exist, but rather that existence is an attribute of a perfect *being* such that only a perfect *being* must be said to exist.

The language that Anselm uses throughout is convoluted and it is not altogether certain what he intends by this distinction. (Anselm, of course, does not use the term 'perfect being' at all, but "that than which nothing greater is conceivable.") Nevertheless we can attempt to gain insight into what Anselm is intimating by looking more closely at the concept 'perfect.' In ordinary usage we generally mean by perfect that to which we attribute highest value. Thus if something is better than something else, according to some scale of value, it is said to be more perfect. If we understand 'perfect' in this sense another argument can be leveled against Anselm, in addition to those already mentioned. We might argue that the scale of value according to which existence is said to be better than non-existence is arbitrary, and one might just as well choose another scale against which non-existence would be equal to, or superior to, existence.

Anselm's reply to Gaunilo, however, indicates that this is not the sense in which 'perfect' (or 'greatest') is to be understood. There is another meaning to the word 'perfect' which has nothing to do with a scale of value. An existent is said to be perfect when it completely realizes its essence. In other words, it is entirely permissible for us to speak of perfect darkness or a perfect vacuum whether or not we value darkness or vacuums. A perfectly dark night is one in which what we mean by dark is fully realized. In speaking of 'perfect' we need not make any reference to a scale of value.

The ontological argument, then, may be regarded as an attempt to investigate what it means to *be* most perfectly. Gaunilo's objection, in this light, proves to be entirely irrelevant. If one speaks of a perfect island or a perfect unicorn or anything else, one is not even within the domain of the argument, as we now propose to consider it. The argument is not about the

attributes of perfection, but about the attributes of being: What does it mean to say of a being that it satisfies what it means *to be* most fully?

Immediately, of course, we find ourselves at a loss. We do not ordinarily suppose that the concept of *being* admits of degrees. We seem to feel that being is an either/or concept. Either something *is* or it *isn't*. Nothing can *be* more perfectly than something else. Everything that *is*, according to this notion, *is* perfectly. To ask about the most perfect being, in this sense, is like asking about the tallest six-foot man. All six-foot men are equally tall, and all existent entities are equal with respect to being.

There is, though, a possible reply to this objection. If one of the men, for instance, is standing on a crate, we would say that although his head may be six feet from the ground, it is not he himself who is six-foot tall, but he considered together with the crate. In the same sense we might say of a being that requires more than itself in order to account for, sustain, and fulfill its being, that it is less perfect with respect to being than one that does not. We might say, for instance, that although a human being exists, her existence is necessarily dependent upon and in relation to that which we do not ordinarily include in the concept 'human.' Without an environment, without time, without space, and any number of other things we do not include in the concept, she would not be able to be. The concept 'human', then, includes some of the things necessary for a human to be but not all of them. We might say, then, that a human being, considered strictly in herself, is imperfect with respect to being. It is true that while a human being *is* she *is* as truly as anything else, but only because she is standing on many crates. Considered apart from these crates she can only imperfectly – incompletely – be said to *be*.

The most perfect being, then, is one that stands on no crates – a being that is ontologically self-sufficient – requiring nothing beyond itself in order to be. Only such a being

can truly be said to possess *being* in the full sense. Imperfect beings may be said to *be* but only to the extent that they participate in, are sustained by, perfect being. Without something ontologically complete to complete it no ontologically incomplete being could be. Without the most perfect being, thus, nothing could be at all. It follows from this that the existence of anything at all – including the *idea* of a most perfect being – implies the existence of a most perfect being.

We are now in a position to paraphrase Anselm's argument in the light of our own: There exists in the understanding the idea of a most perfect being. This idea cannot be a *mere* idea (i.e., an uninstantiated idea) for the idea itself requires the existence of a most perfect being to account for it. Thus, reflection on even the *idea* of a most perfect being yields the conclusion that a most perfect being must exist.

It will be apparent that this argument, as said earlier, may be regarded as a special case of the cosmological argument from contingent being. It differs from classical formulations of that argument, though, in an important respect. It does not argue from the principle of causal regress but from the principle of ontological completeness. The claim is that only the ontologically self-sustaining is an ontologically complete being, and that less complete beings, as long as they exist, exist only through ontological relationship to it.

This argument is not strictly *a priori*, as it posits the existence of something (namely, the idea of God), but it comes as close to being *a priori* as any deductive argument wishing to conclude the existence of something can. It derives the existence of a most perfect being from the existence of the idea.

II. Anselm's Original Argument

We must now consider to what extent the argument given here, regardless of its merit, is actually a reflection of the argument Anselm presents. We must admit at the outset that it differs. Anselm is no doubt attempting what he is traditionally thought to be attempting – to deduce the existence of God from the *meaning* (not the *existence*) of the idea. He attempts this, furthermore, not from an analysis of the idea of being, but as an inference drawn from the concept 'greatest.' In other words, despite Anselm's protestations to Gaunilo, his argument as presented does indeed appeal to what we have called the 'attributes of perfection.'

Is there, though, any relationship at all between the argument we have given and the one Anselm offers? To explore this question more fully let us look at the argument as Anselm presents it.

Charles Hartshorne, in his book *Anselm's Discovery*, points out that there are actually two distinct arguments in Anselm's writings. The first seeks to prove the existence of God from the idea of God alone. The idea of God, says Anselm, is of "a being than which none greater can be conceived." Such a being must exist for, if not, one could conceive of another being equivalent to it in all respects but for the fact that it does exist, and this being would be greater by reason of its existence. This argument fails, as Kant famously notes and as Hartshorne concedes, because it treats 'existence' as a predicate; that is, as something able to modify essence, and this is invalid. The actual existence or non-existence of a thing does not alter its conceptual quality and hence cannot figure in its conceptual 'greatness.' A merely conceived five dollars is worth, in thought, the same as a real five dollars. Thus it is simply not the case that the idea of "a being than which none greater can be conceived" must refer to an actually existent being in order to qualify as such.

But, according to Hartshorne, Anselm is just warming up with this first argument. The perfected ontological argument, Hartshorne tells us, is the second one. In this argument Anselm does not try to prove God's existence *per se* but rather the “inconceivability” of God's non-existence. Again, Anselm proceeds from the idea of God as a being “than which none greater can be conceived.” Now we are told that such a being must be one whose non-existence is inconceivable, for otherwise one could conceive of a similar being whose non-existence *were* inconceivable and such a being would be greater. God, thus, cannot be conceived not to exist. Hartshorne claims that this argument overcomes the standard objections raised against the first. Anselm is no longer employing 'existence' as a predicate but rather 'inconceivability of non-existence.' Whereas 'existence' cannot modify essence, 'inconceivability of non-existence,' insofar as it concerns the realm of conception and not of actuality, presumably can.

The problem, however, is that this form of the argument, especially in the light of Hartshorne's emphasis, actually reveals a weakness in both forms that is largely concealed in the first. Both arguments rest upon the assertion that, whether or not we believe in God's existence, we nevertheless possess an *idea* of God. To the extent that we possess an idea of God, and to the extent that this idea implies either, 1. that God exists, or, 2. that God's non-existence is inconceivable, Anselm seems to prove his point. But what is the content of this idea that we all possess and which implies one or both of these things? It is, we are told, given in the formula “a being than which none greater can be conceived.” But a bit of reflection reveals that this formula is not actually an idea of God at all; it is merely the *criterion* for an idea of God. Having said that God is “a being than which none greater can be conceived” we have still not said what sort of a being God is; we have merely said what criterion an idea of God must meet in order to qualify as an idea of God. It must be of a being unsurpassable in 'greatness.' But what sort of being would

that be? One can imagine endless debate on this question alone. Even if we accept this criterion, and even if we admit the implication that, by reason of it, the idea of God must entail the inconceivability of God's non-existence (a questionable proposition in itself), we are still left wondering what sort of idea could ever meet such a criterion. What sort of being could never be thought non-existent? The argument never tells us.

Furthermore, given that existence cannot modify essence, there is serious question as to whether 'inconceivability of non-existence' is itself a possible trait. On what *grounds* would God's non-existence be inconceivable? Only ideas that are inherently contradictory are inconceivable. The claim would have to be made that the possibility of God's non-existence contradicts something in the idea of God which implies God's existence. But, as we have already said, insofar as existence does not pertain to essence, no mere idea can imply existence. Hence, no mere idea can imply 'inconceivability of non-existence'. (Even the idea of 'existence' does not imply the actual *existence* of existence. This is important to note in relation to the claim that God's essence is the concept of existence itself, or entails the idea of necessary existence. What we have said at the beginning concerning the nature of deductive reasoning should be sufficient to indicate that no mere idea can imply the actual existence of that which is conceived in the idea, not even the idea of 'existence' or 'necessary existence.' Only the existence of 'existence' would imply existence.)

If no mere idea can imply existence, and some idea implying existence is necessary to establish 'inconceivability of non-existence,' it follows that no mere idea can imply 'inconceivability of non-existence.' The inconceivability of God's non-existence could only be implied by the *existence* of something that implied God's existence. And then God's non-existence would be inconceivable only relative to that thing. Anselm would like to derive the

inconceivability of God's non-existence from the idea of God as 'greatest conceivable being,' but this he can only do to the extent that this idea implies God's existence – which is precisely what Anselm failed to show in the first argument. Thus, the second argument is dependent upon the first for its validity.

If we are correct and it is impossible to conceive of a being whose non-existence is inconceivable by reason of its essence alone, then, clearly, this cannot be a requisite of the 'greatest *conceivable* being.' Hartshorne argues that if Anselm has not established the existence of God, and if he has not definitely established the inconceivability of the non-existence of God, he has *at least* established the inconceivability of God *except* as a being whose non-existence is inconceivable. In other words, he has established that either God's non-existence is inconceivable or else that the idea of God is meaningless for it *entails* that God's nonexistence be inconceivable. But Anselm has not even established this. The greatest conceivable being need not possess characteristics that are *inconceivable* in order for it to be the greatest *conceivable* being. So Anselm's argument, as a strictly logical proof, has established nothing at all.

III. The Ontological Argument as Contemplative Exercise

The above, then, constitutes Anselm's ontological argument. As we have indicated throughout, its reasoning is seriously flawed. Judging from the logic alone it may be difficult to see any merit in it. But the matter is not as simple as this. The ontological argument is an attempt to deal with an extraordinary topic: the nature of God. In rejecting Gaunilo's analogy of the island Anselm indicates that the ontological ultimacy of God places all thought about God in a unique class. To speak of God's existence is not quite like speaking of the existence of anything else. The concept of God, which entails the notion of ontological ultimacy, bears a relationship to the

idea of *existence* that no other concept does. One has a choice when approaching Anselm's argument. One can look at the logic alone, and amuse oneself for a few hours unraveling its convoluted word-play, or one can seek to look beyond the logic, to the meaning of the concepts themselves, and recognize the argument as an effort to articulate, and reflect upon, the ontological ultimacy of God. From the perspective of this second approach the argument appears as something more than a mere argument. It is a contemplative exercise. One can see in the argument a tantalizing attempt to capture in logical form the contemplative's experience of the *presence* of God in the contemplation of God. It is a peculiarity of the ontological argument that it can seem hopelessly silly or richly evocative depending upon which of these approaches one takes.

Anselm originally entitled his argument "Faith Seeking Understanding" and then changed the title to "Proslogium," meaning "A Discourse." The nature of this discourse is indicated by whom it addresses. Anselm addresses his argument directly to God. The argument, in other words, is presented as a kind of prayer. As Anselm himself explains "I have written the following treatise in the person of one who strives to lift his mind to the contemplation of God." All of this serves to indicate that we are dealing here with an argument that suggests itself on other than purely logical grounds. To fully appreciate the argument we must penetrate beyond its logic to what it intends. Indeed, in the attempt to show a link between the idea of God and the reality of God we see an effort to express the interpenetration of God's immanence and transcendence: The idea of God, immanent to our own minds, opens us to the transcendent reality of a God whose transcendence is reflected in his immanence. Anselm's vision of a God whose reality is so pervasive that it is evident even in the uncertainty of one who asks after it, is a logical echo of a

spiritual experience sometimes claimed by the devout: that the presence of God is manifest in the very contemplation of God.

What is the basis of such an experience? Perhaps we can find a clue to it in Friedrich Schleiermacher's notion that the awareness of God is characterized by a feeling of "absolute dependence." This feeling must be sharply distinguished from any experience of material or spiritual destitution. Absolute dependence is *absolute*; that is to say, it is not based in one's worldly circumstances. Quite the contrary, it is recognized as a fundamental characteristic of finite existence. The feeling of absolute dependence arises in the experience that one is not the ultimate source of oneself, hence one is absolutely dependent upon whatever is. Such a realization has a dual quality: On the one hand one experiences one's utter contingency: Left to oneself one is nothing. On the other hand one experiences one's relationship to that which is ultimate: Precisely because one would be nothing left to oneself, it cannot be that one is left to oneself. Precisely to the extent that one does not, in oneself, command the power to be, one's being must abide in whatever does.

Thus there is a spiritual dialectic in the experience of faith. The awareness of "absolute dependence" is an awareness of powerlessness and vulnerability. One has not produced oneself and one cannot endlessly sustain oneself. One is ignorant of the ultimate conditions for one's being and has no power over those conditions. But just insofar as one knows oneself *not* to be the source of one's being, one also knows one's being to be in some relation to whatever is. One's very impotence is one's abiding in omnipotence. One's very nothingness is one's transparency to that which is "All in All." The question of God is asked in the tremulous awareness of one's smallness: What does my smallness rest upon? What supports it? What is my relationship to that which is whole, complete? And in the awareness of my smallness the question of God receives

the beginnings of an answer: a relationship with that which is complete is implied in my very incompleteness and smallness, for without such a relationship even my smallness would be far too great to *be*. Or, to put it in the terms of Anselm's argument: a being "than which none greater can be conceived" must exist as the ultimate ontological support for even the search for such a being.

But there is more to the experience of absolute dependence than simply the feeling of *ontological* dependence. It is also a feeling of *spiritual* dependence. The first feeling leads to the question: "What *do* I absolutely depend upon?", and the second leads to the question: "What *can* I absolutely depend upon?" The first question seeks the ground of being, the latter the ground of goodness. But for the latter question to find a satisfactory answer these two must be one. Unless the ground of goodness is also the ground of being, it cannot be *absolutely* depended upon. If God is to be the greatest with respect to goodness God must, therefore, also be the greatest with respect to being.

Anselm's argument attempts to link these two; to show that what is absolutely great in every respect (and, hence, what is absolutely great spiritually) must also be what is absolutely great in respect to being. It is this, I believe, that has given the argument so much appeal over the years – an appeal that lives on despite the argument's overt and oft-noted failings. In the contemplation of God the contemplative's mind naturally links God's ontological and spiritual ultimacy, sensing that each entails the other.

Our "interpretive revision" of the ontological argument in section one, on the other hand, – a version of the argument from contingent being – cannot establish this link. That argument can only conclude the existence of something non-contingent (ontologically ultimate) as that which must exist to support the contingent. The *spiritual* character of this ultimate, however, cannot be

inferred from the argument. Whereas Anselm's argument is able to attribute to God all traits that can be said to have 'greatness,' our argument can attribute nothing but ontological ultimacy. We cannot show that God is good or that God is love, all we can show is that God must be such as to be the ultimate support for what-is. To go any further logic must yield to faith. Faith entails the confident hope that the answer to the question "What *do* I absolutely depend upon?" also answers the question "What *can* I absolutely depend upon?" In contemplative experience one senses the presence of a Greatness that answers both questions at once.

The logic of our argument, then, if taken seriously, may bring one to the threshold of faith, and perhaps open one's mind to a contemplative experience supportive of faith. But that is as far as logic can go. It cannot confirm the truth of the faith experience. Only faith itself can do that, and only for the one who abides in it.

Anselm's original argument, in contrast, does link God's spiritual ultimacy (his being greatest in terms of goodness) with God's ontological ultimacy (his being greatest in terms of being), and in this way mirrors contemplative experience more exactly. But, again, the logic is flawed. We can agree that the *idea* of spiritual ultimacy entails the *idea* of ontological ultimacy. And we can agree that the ontologically ultimate must exist, for the existence of anything at all implies it (this is the argument from contingent being). But it cannot be shown that the ontologically ultimate must exist in such a manner as to conform to our idea of spiritual ultimacy. The fact that all A is B does not mean that all B is A. The fact that anything that can conform to our idea of spiritual ultimacy must be ontologically ultimate, does not mean that anything ontologically ultimate must conform to our idea of spiritual ultimacy. The failure to recognize this is the error in Hartshorne's and Anselm's thinking. Nevertheless, the argument is not worthless. It tells us something about our search for God, about the meaning of faith, and about the relationship of the spiritual to the

ontological. That it does this is its great merit. That it attempts to do what only faith itself can do is its ever-intriguing flaw.

It is tempting, though, to imagine that Anselm might have first come to his argument through just such a contemplative experience as we imagine – that in reflecting upon his own smallness and fragility his mind was suddenly pierced with an intuition of that Supreme Greatness upon which his smallness and fragility must rest – and that the “fool” he originally addressed, who “hath said in his heart, there is no God,” might have been none other than his own doubting self.